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## NATO in transition

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The run-up to the celebrations of NATO's 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary in London revealed a wide range of problems the Alliance is currently facing, starting with the differing narratives on trans-Atlantic relations, the varying threat perceptions, insufficient political consultations on strategic issues, disagreements over defence spending, and ending with the question of leadership. Given the increasing number of external challenges, diverging national interests and growing polarisation in internal policies, NATO member states find it more and more difficult to find common ground. At the same time, in the period of intensifying geopolitical rivalry, maintaining a functioning political and military alliance is still the best option for the United States and Europe alike. Thus NATO is about to enter yet another phase of adaptation. It will have to develop a new *modus vivendi* for better consultations and coordination concerning such challenges as Russia, China or terrorism. It is an open question what policy other NATO member states should adopt with regard to Turkey. A new military burden sharing is long overdue in order to better manage Europe's collective defence on the eastern flank and crisis response in the southern neighbourhood. The European pillar in NATO needs to be strengthened and an intra-European 'grand bargain' in security and defence has to be found. This requires taking into account various perspectives on European security and launching a strategic dialogue between France, Germany and Poland, among others. A discussion is needed on how European military capabilities and policy coordination should be developed so as not to divide Europe and to strengthen the Alliance and relations with the USA without adversely affecting NATO and trans-Atlantic ties.

### The differing narratives

Currently there are at least three contradictory narratives on the future of NATO and the West that function simultaneously in the transatlantic debates. The one that predominates in Western Europe, and is promoted by France but also present in Germany, emphasises the US focus on the rivalry with China and claims that Washington is gradually withdrawing politically and militarily from Europe. President Trump's recent decision to withdraw US troops from northern Syria validates this thinking. On the other hand, the narrative of the eastern flank countries emphasises

the return of the US to Europe and the unprecedented US political and military engagement in the region. This includes not only increasingly closer US-Polish military ties and strengthened Poland's role as a Central European hub for US military operations on the entire eastern flank, but also the US exercise Defender 2020 with ca. 20,000 US Army soldiers being deployed from the continental US to Europe next year. In turn, US diplomats and analysts argue that Washington's intention is to redefine the military alliance with Europe without undermining it, as in a changed geopolitical environment the US is unable to engage both in crisis manage-

ment in Africa and the Middle East and in containing Russia and China. Furthermore, in the US debates the problem of fighting and winning two major wars at the same time (against China and Russia) is being raised.

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These narratives, built also upon the national interests, provide different answers about the future of NATO. The US wants an alliance in which Europe would to a larger degree than before complement (or sometimes even replace) the US military presence in the European neighbourhood (for example, in Syria), on the eastern flank and even in the Asia-Pacific region. Poland and other eastern flank countries want to keep, prolong and enhance the NATO and the US military engagement in Central Eastern Europe. France, in turn, strives for a European political, military and industrial autonomy in foreign and security policy under French leadership and wants Europe to emancipate from the US. Germany is still aware of the US role in guaranteeing European security and hardly sees the French proposals to be in its interest, as they fail to take into account Central European perspectives and open the controversial question of a European nuclear deterrence, among others. Germany is aware of the differing threat perceptions of the eastern and southern Allies; itself it does not really see a military threat coming from Russia and feels endangered by Islamic terrorism coming from the South only to some extent. Nevertheless, Berlin wants to enhance European sovereignty in foreign and security policy in co-operation with Paris, but in a manner that will not adversely affect NATO and the US security guarantees.

## **The varying threat perceptions**

The deterrence and defence (complemented with elements of dialogue) vis-à-vis Russia has been in NATO's focus since 2014, in line with the eastern flank countries' threat perception. The Alliance has started to strengthen the collective defence again by increasing allied military presence in Poland, the Baltic states and Romania, among others. However, six years since the annexation of Crimea the analysis of threats and challenges in NATO is no longer so obvious.

Regardless of the US strong engagement in deterrence and defence measures on the eastern flank, Washington wants NATO to at least analyse the challenges resulting from China's increasingly assertive and growing economic and military power. This also (or above all) relates to Chinese activity in Europe affecting broader security. Hence, NATO defence ministers adopted in October 2019 updated baseline requirements for civilian telecommunications, including 5G, which signals a will to look for common ground on protecting critical infrastructure in Europe from Chinese infiltration. At the same time, all this does not mean that NATO will become preoccupied with containing China in the future. The Allies are divided on the issue of how to shape policies vis-à-vis Beijing, and may end up (in the best scenario) better coordinating their actions on the national, EU and international level.

France presses on increased allied engagement in combating Islamic terrorism in Africa and the Middle East and is questioning the hitherto NATO consensus on Russia and, possibly, the common approach on China. In President Macron's opinion, Russia is a potential strategic partner for Europe, in combating terrorism among others, and China does not need to be perceived as a threat. In turn, Germany has become convinced that it is necessary to maintain a limited deterrence and defence policy against Moscow (additionally strengthened by the US

presence on the eastern flank), dialogue included. However, Berlin does not see this as an obstacle to pursuing the strategic Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline project together with Russia. China is a subject of heated discussions in Berlin, and it seems that only the next post-Merkel government will be able to develop a consistent policy on Beijing. Crises and conflicts in Europe's neighbourhood are viewed as an increasing challenge in Germany, but Berlin has not reached a point in which political declarations translate into military engagement.

Turkey wants NATO to recognise the Kurdish groups in Syria as terrorist organisations and as a threat to NATO, since Ankara sees them undermining the Turkish statehood. Furthermore, Turkey is not taking part in NATO's deterrence and defence policy in the Baltic Sea region, is using the update of the eastern flank's defence plans as a bargaining chip in the Alliance and is engaged in advanced military-technical co-operation with Moscow.

### **The insufficient consultations**

The tensions inside NATO linked to different threat perceptions are escalating also due to the lack of strategic allied consultations on issues vital for European security. The issue of uncoordinated operations in northern Syria is the most striking example. Washington did not inform its European Allies beforehand on the decision on the withdrawal of the US troops, despite their close co-operation with the British and French forces in the theatre. However, it needs also to be mentioned that the US administration had been making unsuccessful efforts for at least a year to replace the US troops with European forces. After President Trump's decision, Turkey launched an uncoordinated military offensive in northern Syria targeted against Kurdish groups allied with the US. In this context, the German defence minister's public proposal to set up a security zone in northern Syria without consulting NATO Allies first, seems to be less

weighty. It was aimed rather at stimulating the domestic debate on military engagement in the European neighbourhood than provide a basis for serious talks with the Allies. Nevertheless, it caused some consternation inside NATO.

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Meanwhile, the French President's public proposal on reopening a strategic dialogue with Russia without consulting the Allies is a much more serious illustration of the problem. Macron spoke about the need to revise the relationship between Europe and Russia since the European strategic autonomy, as desired by France, is only possible with a strategic partnership with Moscow in place. Such a partnership would entail co-operation in combating terrorism, in resolving frozen conflicts, and would possibly mean withholding EU and NATO enlargement policy. The current French stance on reconsidering the Russian offer to introduce a moratorium on deploying intermediate-range nuclear missiles – as a way of resolving the problem with the end of the INF Treaty – is also inconsistent with NATO's agreed position. Macron's proposals are not being considered by NATO, but they are undermining the allied consensus on policy towards Moscow.

### **The battle for money**

The 2% of GDP defence investment pledge to be fulfilled by 2024 is inalterably on NATO's agenda. According to the recent NATO defence expenditure data, in 2019 nine countries – the USA, Bulgaria, Greece, the United Kingdom, Estonia, Romania, Lithuania, Latvia and Poland – spent 2% of GDP or more for defence. The total defence expenditure of European NATO member states (and Canada) has increased

to US\$302 billion (in comparison with the US US\$685 billion). There is a visible upward trend since 2014 and a recovery from the collapse caused by the financial and economic crisis in 2008. However, twelve Allies (including Germany and Italy) still allocate less than 1.4% of their GDP on defence.

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But not only defence expenditure matters. It is much more important how effectively national defence budgets are spent. They are in many cases not matched by relevant military capabilities and militarily engagement in collective defence and/or crisis management. These seem to be more related to the understanding that military power is one of foreign and security policy instruments, to the political will to use the armed forces, to permanent operational engagement (including combat operations), streamlined modernisation process and reducing red tape. The best example illustrating this problem is Germany, which allocates 1.38% of GDP for defence, but nominally spends €47.8 billion in 2019, i.e. more than France (€44.3 billion). And there is no doubt about the French military capabilities and engagement.

Germany has been the main object of President Trump's criticism because the German economic power and significance in Europe is not reflected in assuming responsibility for common security. Ahead of the NATO meeting in London, Berlin made efforts to reduce the tension over this issue. The defence minister and CDU leader Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer announced that the German defence budget would be increased to 2% of GDP in 2031 (and to 1.5% of GDP in 2024), which was confirmed by Chancellor Angela Merkel. Furthermore, Germany proposed a new cost-sharing formula on the contributions

to the common NATO budget that is used to finance NATO infrastructure, including the headquarters in Brussels (a total of €2.12 billion in 2019). Berlin committed to increase its annual contribution from 14.8% to 16.35% and proposed to reduce the US share to the same level (from 22.1%). Thus, starting from 2021, Germany will be paying €33 million more, and the USA €120 million less. In effect, other Allies will have to fill the resulting gap of around €90 million. Paris, surprised by Berlin's proposal, has already announced that it does not intend to pay more.

### The imbalance of power inside NATO

The issues mentioned above are topped by the question of leadership in NATO, which complicates relations and the balance of power inside the Alliance.

President Trump's style of doing politics and the non-transparent decision making process add to the growing uncertainty in NATO. Moreover, the US has relinquished its active and constructive role as NATO's leader. The Trump administration has given up building a consensus on such strategic issues as response to the rise of China and has attempted to impose the US policy on the Allies, which Washington is no longer capable of. The US diplomacy has also on many occasions seized to assume leadership in the NATO daily business. It has also become obvious that the Alliance is not functioning well without proper US-German relations, which largely deteriorated under the Trump administration. However, this is not only Washington's fault.

After 2014, Germany became a balancer between the eastern and the southern NATO and EU member states as regards the deterrence and defence policy, with a limited military engagement on the eastern flank. It has also defended EU sanctions against Russia, at the same time opting for dialogue with Moscow. Germany also played a leading role in the Normandy Format talks aimed at resolving the Russian-Ukrainian war in Donbas, with a tacit support from the

Obama administration. However, the poor condition of the Bundeswehr, the unwillingness to increase the defence spending and to enhance military engagement in collective defence or crisis management, coupled with the current political inertia have all caused Berlin to turn from a stabiliser of trans-Atlantic relations into another problem for NATO. It seems that it is only when the grand coalition ends, the process of redefining German security and defence policy may begin, possibly by a new CDU/CSU-Green coalition. A leftish government formed by the Greens, the SPD and the Left Party might however create completely new problems for the Alliance.

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The United Kingdom also cannot be expected to assume the NATO leadership. London has been heavily engaged militarily both on the eastern flank and in the southern neighbourhood. However, since 2016 Brexit and the related domestic problems have excluded the UK from the real debate on both European defence and the future of NATO.

This imbalance of power is being currently used by President Macron, who is fighting for French interests and French leadership in the European foreign and security policy. However, France has been inapt to build coalitions and winning allies by taking into account their security policy perspectives at least to some extent. Paris has not even tried to talk to Warsaw about the French visions of the European strategic autonomy complemented with future strategic dialogue and partnership with Russia. It even no longer coordinates its initiatives with Berlin – due to the perceived self-blockade of the grand coalition. The French ideas are therefore torpedoed not

only for substance but also for style in Europe. Not only Poland and the eastern flank countries view them as harmful. Germany is also openly criticising President Macron's ideas.

### **The future of NATO: “the reports of my death are greatly exaggerated”**

The problems listed above are nothing new. The Allies have perceived threats differently, have pushed through various national goals and have consulted each other politically to a smaller and greater extent over the 70 years of NATO's existence, in particular since the end of the Cold War. However, given the increasing number of external challenges, the differing national interests and the intensified polarisation in domestic policy, it is more and more difficult for member states to find common ground. At the same time, Europe is still the best political and military ally for the United States. It is not only because of allied political and military support for US operations abroad but also due to enhancing US global power projection through US military bases in Europe. For Europe the US remains the most important and irreplaceable ally for guaranteeing European security and for stabilising political relations between European states. Paradoxically, without strong relations with the US, Europe will not become more integrated but rather more divided, signs of which are already visible. Thus, in the era of intensifying geopolitical rivalry, maintaining a functioning political and military alliance is still the best option for all its members. However, this option requires political and military investments.

Firstly, this means resuming strategic dialogue on all threats and challenges: Russia, China and terrorism and elaborating a common understanding on how to tackle them. This requires Washington's political will, stable political situation in the UK, a new government in Berlin, which will see the need and will be able to change German security and defence policy, a step-back from Paris and engagement from

Warsaw. The launch of a reflection process to further strengthen NATO's political dimension at the meeting in London might be a good start to resume such a dialogue.

Secondly, it is vital to reinforce the European pillar in NATO. This includes the long overdue redefinition of burden sharing with significantly enhanced European military capabilities and European engagement on the eastern flank and in the southern neighbourhood, which has been discussed for years already. This gives rise to the fundamental question about how European military capabilities and policy coordination should be developed so as not to divide Europe, and to strengthen the Alliance and relations with the USA without adversely affecting NATO and trans-Atlantic ties. It will require greater German and French engagement on the eastern flank as well as German and Central European involvement in the southern neighbourhood. The European member states will have to find

an intra-European 'grand bargain' in security and defence which may be executed in various formats – in the EU, NATO or multilateral initiatives. Such a 'grand bargain' will require, in particular, a strategic dialogue between France, Germany and Poland, the countries representing different perspectives on European security. To make it happen Paris needs to become open to the Central European threat perception (and *vice versa*) and Berlin has to intensify its military engagement abroad.

The most difficult challenge to resolve might be the internal one. It is an open question what policy other NATO member states should adopt with regard to Turkey questioning democracy and rule of law in internal policy, forcefully demanding recognition of its own security interests while establishing closer military-technical co-operation with a country whose aggressive actions are officially recognised as constituting a threat to Euro-Atlantic security.

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